DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 194 CS 204 807

AUTHOR Weiss, Robert H.; Field, John P.
TITLE Cases for Composition: A Theoretical Model for Writing Instruction.
PUB DATE Dec 79
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association of America (93rd, New York City, December 27-30, 1978); For related document, see ED 161 060

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Assignments; *Composition (Literary); English Instruction; Higher Education; *Student Motivation; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Exercises

ABSTRACT

To aid in the understanding of "cases" for writing (defined as highly focused situations in which students assume a role that demands writing to specific audiences and for utilitarian purposes), this paper begins by outlining the problem case faced by the author: to present a convincing argument for the use of the case approach to composition. It then notes that the purpose of cases in a composition course should be to engender writing, suggests how composition teachers can use a case approach, and describes three sample cases. For one of the cases--which requires students to write about baseball rules in answer to questions from the 11-year-old Indonesian pen pal of an American boy--the paper includes the "letters" from the Indonesian boy, outlines the writing assignments for the case, and describes the values of using the case in a composition class. Finally, the paper outlines the three key assumptions on which the case approach to composition is based: writing can be taught most effectively when students accept its purpose; the reading in a writing course must lead closely and directly to the writing; and the principles of good writing are better learned from carefully designed writing assignments than from prescribed rules of composition. (GT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED172194

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Cases for Composition: A Theoretical Model for Writing Instruction

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert H. Weiss
John P. Field

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Robert H. Weiss
John P. Field

West Chester State College

Presented to the Teaching of Writing Division

of the Modern Language Association,

December 29, 1979.

CS 204807

Cases for Composition: A Theoretical Model for Writing Instruction

Your book--a text that presents what you consider to be a marvelous new way to teach writing--has recently hit the market. You and your co-author naturally want very much to help explain your method wherever you can: at conferences, meetings, and workshops; in informal discussions; and in professional journals. You were rather tickled that several publishers vied strenuously with each other to sign your book, confirming your own conclusions about the efficacy of your case approach to composition. Yet your pride in this marketing coup and your relief at having finished the book are somewhat muted because you must now write an explanation of your concept for publication in an important professional journal. The case approach is not particularly complicated, but it requires careful presentation, and your understandable enthusiasm for discussing it is tempered by a matter of professional ethics: you must not seem to be touting the sales of your book. It's going to be hard to convince readers that this is not your major objective. Nevertheless, you believe strongly in the virtues of teaching writing with cases, and you want to be eloquent and convincing when you present your ideas, even at the risk of appearing self-serving.

This audience, you figure, will not be an easy one to persuade no matter how you appeal to it. Although a professional body of English teachers, it is anything but unanimous in its concept of how to teach writing. Diverse schools of thought abound, each one represented by authors of other textbooks, who will probably read your article, and quite critically. One of

the reasons you've come out with a text of your own, of course, is your belief that many of those schools of thought, and their textbooks, may not be doing everything that needs to be done to improve writing instruction. You wonder how you will be able to move such a variety of potentially skeptical minds to respect your opinion, let alone accept it.

On the other hand, you know that the problem you are dealing with is now well understood by the English profession and that your perspective is shared by others. Many of your readers may remember when Wayne Booth established the crucial notion of rhetorical stance; when Richard Larson argued for a composition pedagogy based on a specific speaker, purpose, occasion, and audience; when James Moffet called for "realistic communication 'dramas'" for students; when Young, Becker, and Pike posited the complete dependency of the writer's intention on "the relation of the message to the reader's knowledge, attitudes, and values;" when James Kinneavy theorized that "purpose in discourse is all important" and that an understanding of the audience is primary in communication; when Walter Ong developed the notion that all writing is done for fictive audiences; when Frank D'Angelo concluded that "in the very act of formulating a thesis we are choosing some roles for ourselves and assigning some roles to our audience;" and when John Warnock argued that writing skills are best developed through "purposeful and consequential action in a rhetorically meaningful scene."[1] If your readers have been attending professional conferences instead of surveying the literature, they will remember the 1977 MLA meetings, where Elizabeth Wooten Cowan drew from her own experience as a composition teacher to conclude that writing is role-playing, that assignments ought

to assume a fictional audience, and that writing instructors should proceed by establishing a context for writing rather than giving precepts and advice; and Andrea Lunsford cited such philosophers of language and learning as Vygotsky, Piaget, Chomsky, Britton, and Polanyi to support her assertions that students learn by doing and therefore do not have to master all of the rules, and that writing teachers should design problem-solving situations that give students training in analytic, inferential skills. With all of this testimony from distinguished teachers of writing, you know that you will not have to justify further your basic assumption about the importance of rhetorical situation. All you will really have to do is show that you've found a means to translate these conclusions into a teaching tool suitable for today's composition students.

Given a probable predisposition in your audience to accept the theory on which the cases approach is based, perhaps you should just use a straight-forward, no-nonsense introduction, a crisp statement of your ideas, and appropriate and convincing support for them. Or you could try putting some sparkle into your introduction. You are also concerned about length, especially because one subject that should be defined commodiously--what a case is--is unfortunately going to have to be handled briefly. No journal will want too lengthy an article. Generalized explanations of the case approach can be developed easily enough in the space usually allotted, but examples of cases will have to be few and brief. And, since cases will probably be rather new to most of your readers, this restriction will unquestionably be a disadvantage for you.

You certainly have a real problem. Indeed, if what has just been read were a case, it would be called a "problem" case. Although very brief, it outlines what a real case might be like: that is, it presents the basic elements of a writing situation and sets forth the problem for the writer. Had it included a scenario describing the results of the writer's efforts--for example, favorable reaction by distinguished readers--it would be what is called a case "report." Had it been lengthier, perhaps including a description of the case approach written for another purpose and to another audience, it would be what is called a case "study" or "history." Had it proceeded by unfolding a series of episodes, each building upon the earlier ones and each requring a different writing task, it would be a sequential case. And had it required the writer to investigate the topic before proceeding with the task, it would be a research case. With these designations,[2] which are serviceable and comprehensive but of course not mutually exclusive, and with the foregoing "problem case" itself in mind, we can describe writing cases and explain their value in writing courses.

A case, as we define it, is a highly focussed situation in which students assume a role that demands writing to specific audiences and for utilitarian purposes. A writing case establishes a true-to-life dramatic fiction providing context, constraints, and options for the writer, as well as a functional problem-solving objective for each assignment. Within their fictional situations, cases frequently permit students to re-write the same material in a variety of voices and to several different audiences. Some cases are completely self-contained units--in a sense, data banks for information processing in writing--while others are frameworks for invented solutions or research. In all cases, rhetorical precepts are not identified

as such but are integrated into the case design, specifically, into the contextual information and the writing assignment.

The sole purpose of cases in a composition course should be to engender writing. Thus they should be designed to minimize reading and conceptual difficulties, to appeal to students' interests, and to appear authentic and practical. What is read in a properly constructed case is so obviously linked to what must be written that only minor complications of understanding should occur. Because cases provide many of the ingredients for a piece of writing, they do not force students to invent topics and commentary, to hunt for what is "supposed to be" included in their writing, or to write the language of abstract philosophical themes. Although on superficial examination this might make cases seem to constrain imagination, significant rhetorical invention and self-discovery are stimulated as students proceed from contextual knowledge to the selection of the ideas they wish to advance.

It should be clear that cases are not just strings of assignments; nor are they vehicles for teaching subject matter. Students can indeed imitate the language and content of a case (and may perhaps be encouraged to do so) but they will have to reshape these significantly to meet the specific constraints of a rhetorical occasion. With essays, and with cases of other sorts (as in law or business administration) students are expected to learn the content and be tested on it. Yet the experience of many composition teachers seems to prove that having to learn content often interferes with the composing process. So much time may be spent trying to get a class to appreciate, understand, and be able to talk about the essays or poems traditional in composition courses that everyone concerned is exhausted and

frustrated, with little writing instruction per se actually having occurred. Further, an important part of a student's grade in such a class may be based on comprehension rather than writing, little of which may actually have been done. However, cases not only diminish the need to invent content; they also diminish the need to learn it.

That there are two antecedents of cases as we have defined them may cause some confusion among teachers of composition. The cases used in advanced and graduate courses in business and organizational communication, i.e., in the course on Written Analysis of Cases at the Harvard Business School, are quite similar, but are more difficult and less diverse in subject matter than cases prepared for a general undergraduate course. The "casebooks" popular about fifteen years ago for the term-paper course may be more familiar, and their contents are also similar in some respects to cases as we have used the term. Casebooks are lengthy sets of essays, articles, and source material pertinent to a literary or other topic; in them, however, no inducement is given the writer other than to earn a grade, no real writing role is emulated, and no persona is created except that of the impersonal academic writer commenting objectively and formally to the teacher or an absent professional audience.

This introduction should suggest how composition teachers can use a case approach. Cases incorporating a wide range of rhetorical problems and subject matters should be developed at reading, writing, and comprehension levels appropriate to given classes. After reading a case, students should probe--in class--the fictional situation and the writing it requires, guided in their inquiry to stress ——————→

the appropriate strategies for completing the case's writing tasks. Before writing, they should respond personally to the case, analyze the role to be played by the writer, ascertain the nature of the audience, and specify the writing objectives. This process should be repeated for all of the assignments in a case, even those not requires by an instructor.

Three examples of our own will help both to illustrate the nature and possible uses of cases in composition courses and to show how new cases might be devised.[3]

The first example, a relatively simple case, narrates a problematic situation faced by a homeowner when a repairman refuses to correct a piece of shoddy workmanship. This case's first assignment, a chronologically organized and severely summarized version of the predicament, must be written within the constraints of a complaint form directed to an old-line consumer agency; an additional assignment, written to an "activist" agency when the first fails to produce results, enables the writer to produce a fuller, angrier version of the same situation.

A somewhat more complex case, on fund-raising for a local animal shelter, demonstrates how one issue can receive different treatments for different purposes, and how different audiences have to be persuaded by different writing techniques and strategies. One of the assignments is a brochure describing the activities and policies of an SPCA branch, including its decision to euthanize animals by injection rather than asphyxiation and its adoption policy that encourages the neutering of pets. A second assignment uses the same material for a direct mail solicitation to community residents, and a third uses it for the preparation of a speech. Each of these assignments calls for ample development, both by explanation and by

illustration; for definition; and for analyses of process, of cause, and of effect. Each requires the sensitive selecting of word and phrase--some careful use of emotive language--and each evokes the use of such persuasive strategies as appealing to a common cause, dramatizing an issue, or persuading by degrees.

Our third illustration is an almost complete case--short, but open-ended. Because on its surface it presents a task for a child, and incorporates the valiant but understandably imperfect English of a non-native user of English, it may at first seem simpler than it is.

Instructions from Home Base

Your son has just shown you the following letter from his eleven-year-old Indonesian pen pal, obviously laboring from a dictionary:

> My dear freind Charles
>
> It is of the most great thank that my classmates offer your self for the excellent gifts of 25 basball gloves with hats and many basballs and bats. Very often have we been enjoying our pictures. Now we respectful express another thank you for your self and for 6B class of North Hanover Elementary School.
>
> A question must be asked to your self and 6B class about use and way of basball

playing? School of Kedawung want basball to be excellent. Instructions we need please.

I sent many regards to you and 6B class to hope that the graduating is excellent success and to the parents.

Your freind Turim

Charles says that of course he can explain baseball to Turim's class. But, now that he thinks about it, he doesn't know all the distances between the bases, or from the mound to home plate, and the finer points of the rules are mystifying to him. It would really be a hard job, and he doesn't know where to begin, and he doesn't know where to find all of the information, and it would take so much time, so wouldn't you please "help out"?

Within a short space the case establishes situation, actors, scene, occasion, and purpose. The first assignment requires research and is rather difficult, and the second immediately supplies additional constraints.

Assignment 1

Help out your son by developing a simple but clear set of instructions for the game of baseball so that he and his pen pal Turim can understand it. Decide whether to include a diagram or other pictorial representation. You may use either Little League or Major League rules, but remember to simplify

them so they will be appropriate for your son and Turim's class. Will they really need to know about the infield fly rule, for instance?

Assignment 2

Two months later Charles hands you the following note from his Indonesian correspondent:

> My dear freind Charles,
>
> The most great thanks we have because your excellent baseball instructions we use now for playing. Please see my good spelling of baseball that you said to me. The most great thing now we have two teams Tigers and Pirates. We do play many days enjoying the games. Teacher is umpire. We send again all thanks to 6B class of North Hanover Elementary School. The baseball is excellent.
>
> We must ask the questions to certain the rules? Does three foul balls strike me out? How short must be the shortstop? What does it mean force out runner?
>
> I send many regards to you and 6B class and parents for the graduating.
>
> Your freind Turim

Provide Charles with a suitable response to Turim's inquiry.

This case is especially useful in demonstrating how demanding writing can be, and in overcoming the unfortunate complacency that many students, whether fearful or confident, have about their writing. To make rules as complex as those of baseball understandable to someone with Turim's command of English is a real challenge. Indeed, to make the rules understandable to the other members of a class is almost as challenging. The concept of suiting one's words to the needs of an audience is thoroughly ingrained in the case situation. Students readily imagine Indonesian school children going out to play ball after receiving their instructions; since there will be no way for the players to check the meaning of these instructions, the writers must strain to make them lucid, simple, and intelligible. In our experience, after doing the assignments in this case, students find it impossible to ignor the question of audience, and the discipline of modifying their diction and syntax for an audience readily transfers to their other writing.

With its two other assignments, one an analysis of the process of tying shoelaces, the other a similar analysis of sliding into a base, Instructions from Home Base aptly illustrates the flexibility and diversity of a case approach to composition. Far from being dully utilitarian, a case approach can be imaginative, far-ranging, and profound. We have written cases on ethics, religion, consumerism, and stereotyping; on nursing, woodworking, mathematics; cases that have as many as eight optional assignments; cases that change the writer's sex, status, and point of view; cases that require editing; cases that use sentence-combining exercises; and cases

that incorporate the traditional rhetorical modes of narration, description, definition; and so forth. We have also prepared cases for elementary and high schools.

We began to develop such cases because we recognized the indifferent success of traditional approaches to teaching writing and desired an alternative that would overcome their drawbacks. Three major rhetorical and pedagogical assumptions were suggested by our experiments with a case approach: that writing can be taught most effectively when students accept its purpose; that the reading in a writing course must lead closely and directly to the writing; and that the principles of good writing are better learned from carefully designed writing assignments than from prescribed rules of composition. As our work with cases continued, these assumptions grew in prominence for us as teachers of writing; while putting them into practice we were gaining insight into theoretical foundations for the case approach.

With respect to purpose in writing, we agreed with Moffet's complaint about the way we in English "feverishly search for subjects for students to write about that are appropriate for English, sending them to libraries to paraphrase encyclopedias, having them re-tell the plots of books, or writing canned themes on moral or literary topics for which few students have any motivation,"[4] and we agreed also with Ken Macrorie's attack on the strained and unnatural language of "themes."[5] Dissatisfied with the rhetorical meaninglessness of typical assignments, and of the usual alternatives of expressive and free writing, we tried to invest our own assignments with purpose and occasion, and with a clear sense of speaker, message, and audience. The subjects of our cases are therefore taken from areas

that students respond well to--careers, student life, academic subjects, and moral dilemmas. Further, case assignments frequently call for reports, summaries, biographies, letters, speeches, and the like--forms that have an obvious instrumental and contextual purpose and that certainly demand the elements of good writing as well as the conventional theme or essay, and are indeed more profoundly rhetorical than these. By using the practical world as a point of origin, cases in fact provide the realism that is frequently missing in classrooms, conferences, and other teaching situations, and as a result they consistently motivate students to write.

Indeed, one of the main reasons it is usually difficult to motivate students, we have found, is that they feel that nothing in the composition classroom really matters. But case problems bring students close to situations in which they have to use the skills they are supposed to be learning. At some level, perhaps, cases appeal to the basic human desires to test out new roles for the self and to order, control, or even transform reality.[6] In composition classes, no one's taxes are actually being audited, no one's stomach is being pumped. We would assume that medical students, for example, are most highly motivated when practicing appendectomies or the like on living human bodies, somewhat less motivated when working on animals, and somewhat less so on cadavers; and still less so when merely looking at pictures of them in textbooks, or discussing them theoretically. No patients or cadavers are to be had in composition courses (although the experience of some readers may seem to give this the lie), but cases function similarly, if the analogy is not carried too far. To cite an actual occurrence, when some of our students were assigned the second case described earlier in this paper (on the SPCA), they visited the local animal shelter

to survey what actually happens there and wrote to their hometown shelters for additonal information--all without being asked. They wanted to solve the problem they had been presented with: they wanted to be able to write well about it.

Our second key assumption, which is related to this emphasis on purpose, is that the reading in a writing course should not be done for itself but should lead closely and directly to the writing, should actually cause it. The materials collected in anthologies are read for their own sake as belles lettres, socially relevant commentary, rhetorical models, or whatnot. Other texts are read for the advice they supply so amply. In no composition texts that we have examined are the readings connected to the writing assignments in ways that are not arbitrary or unrealistic. And the assignments themselves are relegated to the rear of a chapter, thereby encouraging teachers to relegate them to the last few minutes of a class. The contents of anthologies may be good reading, and the advice given by textbooks and teachers may be sound, but all of it stands between putative writers and the writing to be accomplished. As unfamiliar ground, or material to be learned, or merely required reading, it too readily confounds or obstructs rather than nurtures composition.[7] Good cases are not "readings" on distant or "relevant" subject matters, but are carefully developed rhetorical situations that draw students into their action and that pose problems for them as writers while at the same time direct them to solutions.

Our third assumption, that the principles of good writing are better learned through accomplishing carefully designed writing assignments than from prescribed rules, is intimately related to the second. We go a step further than E. D. Hirsch, who agrees with us that "writing needs to be

taught as a practical, not a theoretical subject;"[8] Hirsch would prefer to reduce the size of textbooks and limit the number of maxims they contain, while we would prefer to embody the maxims in the assignments of a thin book of cases. While in a case approach to writing students do not read the terminology of precept, instructors can supply it whenever they consider it appropriate. As Sir Philip Sidney argued in his Apology for Poetry, "The philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught."[9] A case approach, then, is an inductive pedagogy, yet not one lacking in structure, since the structure of each case is determined by rhetorical precept and necessarily guides the reader-writer. Further, the implied precepts are intimately connected with the subjects the students write about and are given dramatic force by the case situations.

We conclude by recalling the primacy of motivation. A significant part of our profession shares the assumption that writing must be motivated and that once it is writers will find language resources to say what they want to say.[10] What Sidney calls "delightful teaching" is superior to the regular instruction and "learned definition" of philosophical approaches to teaching precisely because it "hath the more force" to move the reader to truth. "And that moving is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear: that it is well nigh the cause and the effect of teaching. For who will be taught if he be not moved with desire to be taught; and what so much good doth that teaching bring forth... as ⟶ that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach? For as Aristotle saith, it is not gnosis but praxis must be the fruit. And how praxis can be, without being moved to practice, is no hard matter to consider." The case

method of instruction, as suggested by one of its recent advocates, links motive with praxis; it "provokes the critical thinking processes and provides a functional relationship between theory and process, between principle and practice, between the printed or spoken word and the actual process of doing."[12] Closely similar to real-life problems, cases are much less limiting than traditional classroom approaches. Other pedagogies may be more realistic--internships, for example--but they are expensive and few in number. The case approach, an effective alternative to such forms of apprenticeship, permits teachers to accomplish in the classroom what they say they have been accomplishing there--teaching people how to write. The number of organizations establishing writing programs for their new employees--all of them college graduates--suggest that emulating the conditions of the world where writing is indeed done for a purpose is firmly in order, and that the rhetoric to be taught must be an applied rhetoric. Cases fulfill this objective. They are a successful compromise that provides solid bridges between rhetorical theory and composition pedagogy, between classroom practice and practical application.

Notes

[1]Wayne Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication, 14 (1963); Richard Larson "Teaching Rhetoric in the High School: Some Proposals," English Journal, 55 (1966); James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 12; Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1970), p. 85; James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 43, 254; Walter J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience is always a Fiction," PMLA, 90 (1975); Frank D'Angelo, Process and Thought in Composition (Boston: Winthrop, 1977), p. 23; and John Warnock, "New Rhetoric and the Grammar of Pedagogy," Freshman English News, 5 (1976), 15.

[2]Taken from Charles F. Fisher, "Being There Vicariously by Case Studies," in On College Teaching, ed. Ohmer Milton and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978), pp. 258-85.

[3]From John P. Field and Robert H. Weiss, Cases for Composition (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).

[4]Moffett, p. 7.

[5]Ken Macrorie, Telling Writing (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Co., 1970), pp. 1-4.

[6]Compare Anne Ruggles Gere, "Writing Well is the Best Revenge," College Composition and Communication, 29 (1978), 259.

[7]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 141-143. Compare John C. Mellon, Transformational Sentence-Combining: A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition, NCTE Research Report No. 10 (Urbana, Ill., 1969), pp. 15-16.

[8]Hirsch, p. 143

[9]Sir Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), p. 30.

[10]For example, James E. Miller, Jr. and Stephen N. Judy, Writing in Reality (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 5.

[11]Sidney, p. 37.

[12]Fisher, pp. 263-64.